

# The institution of semiotics in Estonia

**Compiled by Kalevi Kull, Silvi Salupere,  
Peeter Torop, Mihhail Lotman**

**Abstract.** The article gives a historical overview of the institutional development of semiotics in Estonia during two centuries, and describes briefly its current status. The key characteristics of semiotics in Estonia include: (1) seminal role of two world-level classics of semiotics from the University of Tartu, Juri Lotman and Jakob von Uexküll; (2) the impact of Tartu–Moscow school of semiotics, with a series of summer schools in Kääriku in 1960s and the establishment of semiotic study of culture; (3) the publication of the international journal *Sign Systems Studies*, since 1964; (4) the development of biosemiotics, notably together with colleagues from Copenhagen; (5) teaching semiotics as a major in bachelor, master, and doctoral programs in the University of Tartu, since 1994; (6) a plurality of institutions — in addition to the Department of Semiotics in the University of Tartu, several supporting semiotic institutions have been established since 1990s; and (7) a wide scope of research in various branches of semiotics, including theoretical studies, empirical studies, and applied semiotics projects on governmental and other request.

## 0. Introduction: A methodological note

The semiotic sphere is built up by local semiotic cultures. This fundamental understanding in semiotic science has been a key idea for a 600-pages volume *The Semiotic Sphere* (Sebeok, Umiker-Sebeok 1986), along with many articles since, with the same typical heading, “Semiotics in [...]”, each describing the development of semiotics in a particular

culture. Such reviews have appeared about at least 50 countries,<sup>1</sup> some of them repeatedly. Although Estonian semiotics has a remarkable place in the world, both in its historical role and theoretical depth, a review of *semiotics in Estonia* appears here for the first time.<sup>2</sup>

The description of the history of semiotics that would apply a semiotic point of view to semiotics itself, has to consist of several complementary descriptions. These may include

- (a) descriptions on the basis of different ideological positions (for example, Saussurean, or Peircean, or compilative approach; progressive, or sustainable view on history);
- (b) descriptions of different scope due to different placement of semiotic threshold(s);
- (c) descriptions based on different methodology in describing history (for example, as based on the history of ideas, or narratological historiography, or anarchic methodology, etc.);
- (d) descriptions that give different role to institutionalization of the field, and to the persons involved;
- (e) description and analysis of the problems studied, and the scientific results obtained;
- (f) etc.

Our aim here is to provide a brief description of the institutional development of semiotics (that is, focusing on the point (d) above) in Estonia, taking into account these different perspectives of description. Thus, we describe semiotics done in Estonia throughout the two last centuries, including under semiotics what has identified itself as semiotics,

<sup>1</sup> The volume referred (Sebeok, Umiker-Sebeok 1986) includes review articles on the development of semiotics in 26 different countries. Several reviews on semiotics in different countries have appeared in the bulletin *Semiotix* since 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Part of the problem, of course, was simply political, since Estonia due to its lost independence between 1940 and 1991, has been described sometimes under the title of “semiotics in U.S.S.R.”, or “Soviet semiotics”, as for instance by Rudy (1986), or even much later by Waldstein (2008). Within the last 15 years, a couple of accounts have appeared that describe some larger parts of Estonian semiotics — by Randviir (1996; 2001; Randviir *et al.* 2000: 431–435), Torop (1998; 2000), M. Lotman (2000), and Kull (2009: 499–508; Kull *et al.* 2009: xx–xxiv).

plus what has been widely identified as semiotics by the contemporary semioticians. The reference list attempts to cover the studies *about* semiotics in Estonia, without including the semiotic works themselves — the latter would require a separate review.

## 1. Some early roots

Before 1960s when semiotics became known worldwide as a general study of signs and communication, it has had forerunners which only later were identified as parts of this field. However, these early works prepared the scholarship and intellectual atmosphere, which made the situation favourable for semiotics in Tartu. The only field that was using the term ‘semiotics’ was medicine, but from a theoretical point of view even more important were the early developments in general linguistics and biology.

### 1.1. Medical semiotics

Medical semiotics, although quite specific in its tasks and scope, has to offer an early development of applied semiotics.<sup>3</sup>

Medical Faculty of the University of Tartu had a chair in semiotics almost throughout the 19th century. In 1802–1817, the chair of pathology, semiotics, therapy and clinics was held by Daniel Georg Balk (1764–1826). The chair of physiology, pathology and semiotics which was established in 1820, has been headed by Jean Jacques Friedrich Wilhelm Parrot (1791–1841) in 1821–1826, by Johann Friedrich Erdmann (1778–1846) in 1827–1828, by Martin Heinrich Rathke (1793–1860) in 1829–1835, by Alfred Wilhelm Volkmann (1801–1877) in 1837–1842.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As Eugen Baer reminds, “Sebeok [...] has frequently pointed out that medicine is the oldest leg of “the semiotic tripod” (medicine, philosophy, linguistics)” (Baer 1988: 2).

<sup>4</sup> Siilivask 1982: 228, 229, 232, 236, 241; Toomsalu 2002: 7, 8, 81, 85.

It is remarkable that the leading 19th century biologist Karl Ernst von Baer (1792–1876) has been elected to this position in 1826, but he did not take it due to his unfinished work in Königsberg and returned permanently to Tartu only in 1867 (Toomsalu 2002: 114). Semiotics as a medical discipline has been continuously in the curriculum for medical students also long after this period. However, this had almost no connection to general semiotics or the other branches of semiotics.

A more direct connection between medical semiotics and semiotics as taught in the Department of Semiotics was made in 1994, when Thure von Uexküll was elected honorary doctor of the University of Tartu, in the field of semiotics and medicine.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.2. General (semiotic) linguistics

General linguistics had a strong early tradition in Estonia, for instance due to Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929), who has worked in Tartu during ten years in 1883–1893,<sup>6</sup> and via the work of Leo Meyer (1830–1910), who was the Professor of German philology and comparative linguistics from 1865 to 1898, and to some extent via the work of Jakob Linzbach.<sup>7</sup>

Jan Baudouin de Courtenay was one of the founders of structuralist study of language, whose many ideas were shared and highly valued by Ferdinand de Saussure. Baudouin de Courtenay emphasised the importance of synchronic linguistics, and the study of spoken language instead of written one. He was a founder of phonology. His distinction

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<sup>5</sup> This proposal was made by the head of semiotics department Igor Černov, together with Kalevi Kull (then Prof. of ecophysiology in the biology dept.) and Lembit Mehilane (ass. Prof. of psychiatry), both having had professional contacts with Thure von Uexküll for several years before. On Thure von Uexküll, see also Kull, Hoffmeyer 2005.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Dulicenko 1996.

<sup>7</sup> On some other figures see Mildemberger 2007b. Also, it might be interesting that Anton Budilovich (1886–1908), Rector of Tartu University from 1892–1901, was a slavonic philologist and in his theoretical views he supported Aleksandr Potebnya.

between physiophonetic (later called phonological) and psychophonetic (that is, morphophonological) alternations were important for Prague Linguistic Circle. He was a pioneer in applying mathematical methods in linguistics. Similarly to Linzbach, he was interested in artificial languages. His works have also influenced the development of experimental phonetics. One of his works of Tartu period connects some ideas between biology and linguistics (*On pathology and embryology of language*, 1885).

Jakob Linzbach (1874–1953) published a book *The Principles of a Philosophical Language* in 1916. I. Revzin (1965) has compared this work in some aspects with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure that was published in the same year. Linzbach shared several ideas with Saussure, among these the phonological ones. The main difference is that Linzbach paid much attention to the construction of universal formalized language.<sup>8</sup> Thus Linzbach also belongs to the tradition of constructing a philosophical language that goes back at least to John Wilkins (Nöth 2000: 372f). Isaac Revzin (1965) has called this book on Linzbach “a basic text of general semiotics”.

### 1.3. Jakob von Uexküll and semiotic biology

A biological basis of semiotics is related to an approach in biological theory that studies organisms’ individual worlds and communication. A representative of this trend in biology of the 19th century in Tartu was Karl Ernst von Baer. Baer was among the first who paid attention to the species-specific differences in perception of time in animals.

The end of the 19th century marks the start of neovitalism — very much as a reaction to the growing mechanicism in biology. Neovitalism began in 1887 from an article by Gustav Bunge (1844–1920), a physiologist from the University of Tartu. It occurs that in the first decade of the 20th century most of the leading biologists were supporting neovitalism, at least the milder versions of it. Within this approach the holistic

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<sup>8</sup> See also Dulichenko 2000.

and pre-cybernetic concepts were developed,<sup>9</sup> Jakob von Uexküll being a leading figure.

Jakob von Uexküll (1864–1944),<sup>10</sup> who graduated the University of Tartu, developed an approach in biology that later became a basis for biosemiotics. Developing Baer's view on the individuality of species-specific worlds, he established the theory of *umwelt*, and provided a series of case studies on animal *umwelten*. His seminal monograph on theoretical biology (1920), together with books about animal and human *umwelten* (1934) and the theory of meaning (1940) were turned into the classics of biosemiotic since 1980s.<sup>11</sup> Uexküll's concept of functional cycle has been later taken widely into use as a model of semiosis.

A communicative understanding of the concept of biological species was developed by the Estonian entomologist Wilhelm Petersen (1854–1933), later picked up as a forerunner for the recognition concept of species by Hugh H. Paterson (1993: 21).

## 2. Semiotics as semiotics, since 1960s

1960s made Tartu widely known as a centre of semiotics. This was primarily due to seminal works in semiotics of culture, and also of strong emphasis on theoretical studies (Rewar 1976). Work in other branches of semiotics followed in the next decades.

### 2.1. Juri Lotman

In 1950, Juri Lotman came to Tartu, after graduating Leningrad University. Since 1954, he worked in the University of Tartu. Initially, his research dealt mainly with Russian literature and writers of the early

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<sup>9</sup> See also Magnus 2008.

<sup>10</sup> See Kull 2001; Mildemberger 2007a.

<sup>11</sup> Uexküll 1987; see also in Favareau 2010.

19th century.<sup>12</sup> After defending his doctoral thesis in 1961, he started to work on semiotics, continuing work on the material of Russian literature and culture. According to his own words, Tartu was an excellent place where he could so productively develop his semiotic views — where there was an islet of creativity without so strong ideological dominance and unifying power as in the rest of Soviet Union.<sup>13</sup>

Lotman developed his understanding of semiotics first in his lectures on the analysis of the structure of the artistic text, and further on the typology of culture. His studies focused, in addition to literature, to everyday culture, and film. Lotman's ideas on the semiotics of culture were closely related to the principles which resulted from the analysis of art texts.

Lotman developed an original model of communication, in which he described the relationship of translatability and non-translatability, connecting this with predictability and non-predictability, internal and external recoding, and modelling.

In 1980s, with introducing the concept of semiosphere, Lotman, and Tartu semiotics altogether, moved towards a wider understanding of semiotics (Mandelker 1994; Sebeok 1998; Kull 1999a; Torop 2005). Further, this has led to an understanding that “it is clear that Lotman's system is in harmony with the models presented by Sebeok, Jakobson, and von Uexküll” (Andrews 2003a: 24).<sup>14</sup>

The tradition set up by Juri Lotman is certainly of central importance and a major source of the contemporary semiotic work in this university.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Seyffert (1985: 193) writes about him: “Lotman, a versatile, prolific, and perspicacious literary historian who had distinguished himself with studies of the ideological and literary currents of the pre-Decembrist period until his interest shifted around 1957–1958 to poetics and literary theory in connection with the growing influence of structuralism and cybernetics. Lotman quickly became the leading force of Soviet literary structuralism.”

<sup>13</sup> See Kisseljova 1996.

<sup>14</sup> See also Kull, Lotman 1995.

<sup>15</sup> See also Andrews 2003a; Torop 1998.

About Lotman, there exist several monographic works (Shukman 1977; Segre 1997; Egorov 1999; Arán, Barei 2002; Andrews 2003a, Soo-Hwan 2003; Lepik 2008) and collections of papers (Kantor 2009).

## 2.2. Semiotics of culture

In 1960s, Lotman, together with his colleagues from Moscow, set the foundations for semiotics of culture — for which the explanation of the periphery and center, and the boundaries and borders as the points of creativity have been among its major focus (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973). The place where this approach has been developed — Estonia — is historically very rich in various types of boundaries.

The concept of modelling system, as developed in the Tartu–Moscow school, was defined as “a structure of elements and rules for combining them that is in a state of a fixed analogy to the entire sphere of an object of knowledge, insight or ordering. Therefore a modeling system can be regarded as a language” (Lotman 1967: 130; see also Lotman 1977).

Within the modelling systems as languages, the primary and the secondary ones were distinguished: “Systems that have a natural language as their basis and that acquire supplementary superstructures, thus creating languages of a second level, can appropriately be called secondary modelling systems” (Lotman 1967: 131).<sup>16</sup>

Sebeok, when using this concept, made a point that all organisms make use of models, however, of a different type. According to Sebeok, any umwelt-building is simultaneously a model-building. He called the biological modelling systems the primary (see Sebeok 1991). Still we do not think that it is necessary to abandon the old terminology, because the primary and secondary modelling systems according to Lotman are both belonging to the sphere of human language, whereas the dividing

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<sup>16</sup> This distinction has already been described in the introductory text “From the editors” in *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* (*Sign Systems Studies*) 2: 6 (1965). See also Levchenko, Salupere 1999.



line between non-human and human is of a more fundamental order. This simply means that both — Lotman and Sebeok — were right.

An important aspect of cultural semiotics in Tartu was the movement from static, structuralist description, to dynamic analysis of culture and widening the terminological field. The understanding of cultural dynamics was formulated in the context of the concepts of modeling system, text, culture, semiosphere, explosion, from one side, and in the context of the concepts of communication and metacommunication from the other.

Beside Juri Lotman, Tartu group of semioticians included Igor Černov, Zara Mints, Boris Gasparov, Linnart Mäll, Mihhail Lotman, Peeter Torop, Haljand Udam, Jaak Põldmäe, and others.

### **2.3. Biosemiotics**

Since 1970s, biosemiotic studies were stepwise developed in the framework of theoretical biology group in Tartu. In late 1980s, due to contacts with Thure von Uexküll and Thomas A. Sebeok, this led to contributions in international biosemiotic publications, with the main topics of semiotic mechanisms of speciation and the studies of Jakob von Uexküll's heritage.

Since 1993, a regular course on biosemiotics (probably the first of the kind in the world) was introduced in the University of Tartu, at first in the curriculum of biology, and soon after in the curriculum of semiotics and theory of culture.

The biosemiotic theory has been built as a qualitative approach in the study of living systems. It describes life process as a web of sign relations, whereas the sign relations appear together with code relations and organic needs from the cellular (vegetative) level on. In the evolution of life, the organic selection is evidently more important than natural selection, according to this semiotic understanding. Accordingly, biosemiotics has been developed in Tartu as a non-neodarwinian or post-darwinian theory in biology.

Ecosemiotics — the study of human semiotic relations in ecosystems — started to develop actively in Tartu since the end of 1990s.

Starting from 1990s, Tartu biosemioticians have been the organizers of many meetings and thematic sessions on biosemiotics, both in Estonia and elsewhere.

## 2.4. Conferences on semiotics held in Estonia

Since 1960s, Estonia became a well-known meeting place for semiotics. Here we list the major international semiotic meetings held in Estonia. However, the list may not be complete.

In August 19–29, 1964, a summer school on secondary modelling systems was held in Kääriku. This turned out to be the event that established the Tartu–Moscow school of semiotics. The participants included Juri Lotman, Tatjana Nikolaeva, Isaac Revzin, Andrei Zaliznyak, Elena Paducheva, Boris Ogibenin, Boris Uspenskij, Vladimir Uspenskij, Mikhail Arapov, Tatjana Civjan, Boris Egorov, Vladimir Toporov, Zara Mints, Linnart Mäll, Ivar Kull, *et al.* This initiated the publication of the journal *Sign Systems Studies* (*Trudy po znakovym sistemam*) — the vol. 2 (1965) published several papers from this first summer school.

The second Summer School in Kääriku was held in August 16–26, 1966. Most of the group was the same as in the first school, however here V. V. Ivanov, Roman Jakobson and Krystyna Pomorska participated.<sup>17</sup>

The third Summer School in Kääriku was held in May 10–20, 1968. There were almost as many presentations as before — the 255 page proceedings include 43 presentations.

The fourth Summer School in Tartu was held in August 17–24, 1970. Some sessions of this meeting were held on the riverboat “Mihhail

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<sup>17</sup> But this was not the first visit of Roman Jakobson to Estonia. Already in 1920, before his travel to Prague, he spent a couple of months in Tallinn — at first in March (from the end of February to the beginning of April), and then from the beginning of June to the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 1920, when he left for Prague. See the endnote 10, by Maxim I. Shapir, in Jakobson 1996: 370.

Lermontov” touring the Emajõgi river and Peipsi lake. On Aug. 18, Thomas A. Sebeok was present and gave a talk (Sebeok 1998: 25–27). A thorough overview of this get-together has been provided by Olga Revzina in the 6th issue of *Sign Systems Studies* (Revzina 1970).

On February 8–12, 1974, the symposium on secondary modelling systems, a so-called “winter school”, was organised in Tartu. Its official name was the “The First All-Union Symposium on Semiotics of the Humanities”.

Conference “Biology and Linguistics” that was held in Tartu in February 1–3, 1978 (in connection with the winter school on theoretical biology in Viitna, Estonia, a couple of days before the Tartu conference) was evidently the first large biosemiotic conference at the world scale. It was organised by Kalevi Kull from Tartu, Sergey Chebanov from St. Petersburg (then Leningrad), and Aleksandr Levich from Moscow. In this conference, the term biosemiotics was explicitly used, for instance, one of the sessions was titled “Biosemiotic research in abroad”.<sup>18</sup> The participants included Juri Lotman’s group of semioticians and the groups of theoretical biology from St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Tartu.

The last Summer School in Kääriku was a three-day event at Kääriku, in June 24–26, 1986. Juri Lotman’s health was not the best, however he was present and gave a talk. The sessions were chaired by V. V. Ivanov.

In 1988, a workshop “Semiotic approach in theoretical biology” was held at Laelatu Biological Station, with leaders from theoretical biology groups of Tartu, Moscow and St Peterburg present.

In September 1989, a conference dedicated to the 125th anniversary of Jakob von Uexküll took place in Tartu, with Thure von Uexküll and other members of the Uexküll family taking part in it.

Since 1994, the annual Lotman’s Readings have been held in Tartu in the end of February, the day of Lotman’s birthday (Feb. 28). These have been organised primarily by the department of Russian philology of the University of Tartu, led by Ljubov Kisseljova.

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<sup>18</sup> See *Eesti Loodus* 6 (1978), p. 411; Kull 1999a: 122; 1999b: 404.

In June 1999, a symposium “Uexküll and living environment” took place in Tartu, with the participation of Thomas A. Sebeok. This was followed by the session “Uexküll and biosemiotics” in Imatra, Finland.

In 2001, Tartu and Copenhagen biosemiotics groups initiated the annual international biosemiotics conferences, called Gatherings in Biosemiotics. The 2nd Gatherings in Biosemiotics, in June 14–17, 2002, was held in Tartu, with field sessions at Puhtu and Tallinn Zoo on its last day. Again, the 12th Gatherings in Biosemiotics is going to take place in Tartu, on July 17–22, 2012.

In 2002, an international Lotman conference was held in Tartu and Tallinn.

Beginning from 2002, each summer a Summer Seminar in Ecossemiotics has been held in some beautiful countryside place, as organised together by the Department of Semiotics of the University of Tartu and the Jakob von Uexküll Centre. Some of these seminars were international, like the one in 2004 in Puhtu Biological Station, and in 2011 in Rutja.

In May 2004, a symposium “Cassirer, Lotman, Uexküll: between biology and semiotics of culture” was held in Tartu, with John Krois, Frederik Stjernfelt, Andreas Weber, Dario Martinelli and others.

On September 23–26, 2004 an international conference “Culture, nature, semiotics: Locations IV” was held in Tartu and in Tallinn.

A conference “Naming in Text, Naming in Culture” was held in Tartu in December 14–15, 2007.

Since the establishment of the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory in 2008, which includes the Department of Semiotics, it has organised the international annual conferences that have a strong semiotic component.

An international seminar “Signs of Love” took place in Tartu in May 14, 2009.

In June 2009, June 2010, and June 2011, Lotman’s Days (in Russian) were organised by Tallinn University.

We could also mention here the Estonian-Russian semiotics symposium that took place in St. Petersburg in November 18–19, 2009. Ilya

Utekhin, the head of semiotics program in St. Petersburg University, was the organizer from Russian side.

On November 26–27, 2010, an international conference “Culture in Mediation: Total Translation, Complementary Perspectives” was held in Tartu to celebrate Peeter Torop’s 60th birthday.

In April 2011, a large zoosemiotics conference “Zoosemiotics and Animal Representations” took place in Tartu — evidently the largest and best represented so far in this branch of semiotics.

On August 21–26, 2011, Tartu Semiotics Summer School took place in Palmse. This made a direct link to and a continuation of Kääriku Summer Schools of 1960s, both for its aims, and the participants who attended these meetings — Boris Uspenskij, Boris Egorov, Tatiana Civjan — in addition to Marcel Danesi, Winfried Nöth, Frederik Stjernfelt, Jesper Hoffmeyer, Paul Copley, Göran Sonesson, Eero Tarasti, and the whole Tartu group.

Lotman’s conferences elsewhere in the world (like regular “Lotmanovskie Chteniya” in Moscow), or many other meetings on theoretical semiotics, semiotics of culture, biosemiotics, or other branches of semiotics in which Estonian semioticians have contributed or that have been co-organised by them, cannot be listed here.

## 2.5. The Tartu School

Soon after the first Kääriku Summer School in 1964, the group got known as Tartu–Moscow, or Moscow–Tartu semiotics school. Also, the expression “Soviet semiotics” usually refers to the Tartu–Moscow school (for example, Lucid 1977; Grzybek, 1989).<sup>19</sup> The central figures of Tartu–Moscow school include Juri Lotman, Vyacheslav Vsevolodovich Ivanov, Alexander Piatigorsky, Vladimir Toporov, Boris Uspenskij.

Quite often, Tartu–Moscow semiotics school, particularly if including the work done in Tartu in 1980s, has been called simply as Tartu

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<sup>19</sup> See also Chernov 1988; Grzybek 1989; Koshelev 1994; Neklyudov 1998; Machado 2003; Žytko 2009; 2011.

school (Torop 1992; M. Lotman 2000; Andrews 2003b; Waldstein 2008, etc.).

In the context of contemporary biosemiotics, Copenhagen–Tartu nexus or lineage (Favareau 2010: 53) or school (Barbieri 2008: x) is sometimes mentioned.

According to John Deely's recent words, "Sebeok approached Juri Lotman [...] in establishment of the 'Tartu–Bloomington synthesis'" (Deely 2010: 41–42). Moreover, the synthesis of Lotman's cultural semiotics with Uexküll's biosemiotics has led to the situation where "it is hard to avoid speaking today rather of 'Tartu–Bloomington–Copenhagen school' as having succeeded the earlier 'Tartu–Moscow school'" (Deely 2010: 32; 95–97).

The introduction of semiotics courses in other Estonian universities besides Tartu (see 4.2) means that not all Estonian semioticians are living in Tartu. Although, after all, the school is Tartu school.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. Publications

Considerable amount of writings produced by Estonian semioticians has been published by Estonian publishers.

Tartu University Press publishes several publication series in semiotics. At the moment, these include:

- (a) The international journal *Sign Systems Studies* — established by Juri Lotman in 1964, currently the oldest scholarly journal of semiotics worldwide. Until 1992, this was published in Russian (as *Trudy po znakovym sistemam*), and has been a major platform for Tartu–Moscow school. Since the volume 26 (1998), the main language of the journal has been English; volume 39 (four issues) appeared in 2011;

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<sup>20</sup> In addition to strictly academic constituents, the atmosphere of the school includes certainly much more; some aspects of this have been characterized in memoirs, some other in texts of science writers, including in rather belletristic texts (for example, on J. Lotman — Broms 2001; on biosemiotics — Weber 2007).

- (b) An international book series *Tartu Semiotics Library* — established in 1998, with ten volumes published since then);
- (c) A book series *Dissertationes Semioticae Universitatis Tartuensis* for doctoral dissertations in semiotics defended in University of Tartu — established in 2000, with sixteen volumes published since then;
- (d) The journal of the Estonian Semiotics Society, *Acta Semiotica Estica* — established in 2001, eight volumes published since then;
- (e) An electronic journal *Hortus Semioticus* — established in 2006, registered via Tartu University Press, six volumes published since then).

In addition to these, Tallinn University Press has started

- (f) A book series *Bibliotheca Lotmaniana* — established in 2010, with one volume published.

In addition to publication via Estonian publishers, Estonian semioticians have published widely elsewhere. For instance, the first Estonian scholars publishing in *Semiotica* were Uku Masing (1969) and Juri Lotman (1974, 1975, 1975, 1977, 1978), succeeded by many since 1990s. The editing activity has also been remarkable — special issues of the journals *Semiotica*, *European Journal of Semiotics*, *Biosemiotics*, de Gruyter book series *Semiotics, Communication, and Cognition*, and several edited volumes have been co-edited by Tartu scholars.

## 4. Teaching

In order to turn the semiotics centre sustainable, regular teaching activities in semiotics were introduced in Tartu since 1994. The semiotics program has grown into one of the leading teaching programs in the world by 2011.

#### 4.1. University of Tartu

In the University of Tartu, the first curriculum on semiotics as a major (at that time as a part of the curriculum of Russian and Slavic philology) was introduced in 1992. Separate admission to the Semiotics and Theory of Culture program started at 1994. Between 1996 and 2000, the program of semiotics was taught in parallel in Estonian and Russian.

Since 2002, the Estonian-language program is called “Semiotics and Culture Studies” (instead of the earlier “Semiotics and Theory of Culture”).

In 2009, the international master program in semiotics was launched.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, the Department of Semiotics in Tartu is teaching semiotics in its full scope, from undergraduate to graduate to postgraduate years. The students learn semiotics as their major during at least 5 years (up to MA degree), and up to 9 years, if they complete the full PhD program — and there are at least 25 new students every year. In 2010, the semiotics program included 170 bachelor students, 61 master students (from these 32 in the English-language international master program), 28 doctoral students, and 2 postdocs.

The current curriculum of semiotics is actually consisting of four curricula — bachelor, master, and doctoral studies, plus the international master program. The program is joining semiotics of culture, nature, and society — or, in set terms, semiotics of culture, sociosemiotics, ecosemiotics, and biosemiotics. This has been one of the emphases already since the introduction of the program, but compared to the earlier version of the program (see Randviir 1996), this principle has been developed further now (see the lists of courses that these programs include, in Kull 2009).

A noticeable feature and trend in the semiotics program of the University of Tartu is its internationalisation. This comprises the development of cooperation and joint projects with other semiotics centres

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<sup>21</sup> Väli, Kull 2008.



in the world, as well as regular short courses given by visiting scholars (see 5.1).

Graduates from semiotics program have a remarkable role in the Estonian culture. For instance, currently, almost each issue of any cultural journal or newspaper includes a text by a semiotician. The impact of the international students from master and doctoral programs will need some more years to be evident, but it is quite probable that many of them will teach semiotics in the universities around the world.

#### **4.2. Other universities and high schools in Estonia**

The first systematic semiotics program in the country was opened in the Estonian Institute of Humanities in Tallinn in 1991. This included the following courses: introduction to semiotics, semiotics of culture, semiotics of art, semiotics of poetry, methodology of humanities, rhetorics, history of semiotics, semantics, pragmatics, and some other.

In Tallinn Pedagogical University, courses on cultural semiotics have been taught by Peet Lepik, and some zoosemiotic courses by Aleksei Turovski. Since the establishment of Tallinn University (which included merging Tallinn Pedagogical University and Estonian Humanitarian Institute), the semiotics program is led by Mihhail Lotman. Semiotics is taught in BA and MA levels. Also, an international master program in comparative literature and cultural semiotics has been launched.

Already in 1988–1989, Mihhail Lotman gave a course on the introduction to semiotics and mathematical linguistics in Tallinn Polytechnic Institute (now Tallinn Technical University).

Estonian Academy of Arts provides introductory courses on semiotics in several curricula. Estonian University of Life Sciences has included a course on ecosemiotics since 2003. An introduction to semiotics course has been read also in the International University Audentes in Tallinn. In Tartu Art College there is a regular course on semiotics. Occasional courses on semiotics have been given in some gymnasiums in Tartu and Tallinn, as well as in Tallinn Polytechnic School.

In addition to the large semiotics program in the Department of Semiotics in Tartu, obligatory semiotics courses (general semiotics, semiotics of theatre, semiotics of art) are included in the culture education curricula of the Viljandi Culture Academy of the University of Tartu.

## **5. Institutionalization**

The establishment of semiotics since 1960s meant a start in the institutionalization of semiotics internationally. Apart from the specialised publication series and conferencing since 1960s, most institutions under the name semiotics have been established since 1990s. Today these form a mutually supporting network.

### **5.1. Department of Semiotics in the University of Tartu**

In 1960s and 1970s, the Department of Russian literature served as the main unit for semiotic studies. In 1970s, Juri Lotman gave a special course of lectures on semiotics. Already since 1960s, the regular seminars were held, in which the guest speakers included Boris Gasparov, Pavel Sigalov, and also Mart Remmel, Linnart Mäll, Tiit-Rein Viitso, Boris Uspenskij, Vyacheslav V. Ivanov, Sergei Neklyudov, and others.

In 1983, the Laboratory of History and Semiotics was established as a research unit. This was headed by Linnart Mäll (history) and Juri Lotman (semiotics).

The Chair of Semiotics was established in 1992, at the department of Russian and Slavic philology in the Faculty of Philosophy. As a separate department, the Semiotics Department was opened from February 1, 1993 (decision of the university council from Dec. 18, 1992). The first head of the department of semiotics was Igor Černov, Juri Lotman being a professor in the department. In 1995, the department moved to the Faculty of Social Sciences.

In 1997, the semiotics department was enlarged, Peeter Torop became the head of the department and Kalevi Kull and Ülle Pärli joined the department. Since 2006, when Kalevi Kull has the chair, the department has increased again. In 2007, the Department of Semiotics became a part of the Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics in the Faculty of Philosophy. Department of Semiotics as a group belongs to the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory (established in 2008).

In 2010, the staff of the Department of Semiotics includes 14 full-time (among them 2 full professors) and 6 part-time employees.

Many world leading semioticians have visited the semiotics department and given lectures — Thomas A. Sebeok, Myrdene Anderson, Paul Bouissac, Paul Copley, Terrence Deacon, John Deely, Umberto Eco, Karl Eimermacher, Claus Emmeche, Malcolm Evans, Donald Favareau, Dinda Gorlée, Barend van Heusden, Jesper Hoffmeyer, Jørgen Dines Johansen, Gunther Kress, Winfried Nöth, Irene Portis-Winner, Roland Posner, Patrick Seriot, Göran Sonesson, Frederik Stjernfelt, Eero Tarasti, Thure von Uexküll, Vilmos Voigt, Thomas Winner, *et al.* Recent visiting professors who have taught longer courses in Tartu include Myrdene Anderson (spring 2003), John Deely (spring 2009) and Roger Parent (autumn 2009).

University of Tartu has elected three honorary doctors in semiotics — Thure von Uexküll (1994), Umberto Eco (1996), and Vilmos Voigt (2010).<sup>22</sup>

## 5.2. Chair of semiotics and theory of literature in Tallinn University

Since the establishment of the Estonian Institute of Humanities in Tallinn, it has introduced a course in semiotics by Mihhail Lotman. In Tallinn Pedagogical University, semiotics was taught by Peet Lepik. In 2005, these institutions merged and formed Tallinn University. The

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<sup>22</sup> In 1920, Jan Nieciśław Baudouin de Courtenay was elected honorary doctor of the University of Tartu. Tallinn University has elected Jaan Valsiner as an honorary doctor (2008).

Institute of Humanities of Tallinn University includes the professorship in semiotics and theory of literature, with Mihhail Lotman as the professor.

### **5.3. Estonian Semiotics Association**

The Estonian Semiotics Association was established in November 1998. Its aims include the representation of Estonian semiotics on the national basis at the International Association of Semiotic Studies, the organisation of semioticians independently of their affiliation, and the publication of semiotic literature in Estonian. The association organizes annual meetings (autumn schools or spring schools), and publishes the Estonian-language semiotics periodical — *Acta Semiotica Estica*, since 2001. It has also been a co-organiser of international semiotics meetings. Estonian Semiotics Association is an associated member of the Estonian Academy of Sciences and the International Association for Semiotic Studies (IASS-AIS). In 2010, the Estonian Semiotics Association had 60 members.

### **5.4. Jakob von Uexküll Centre**

Jakob von Uexküll Centre was established as a unit of the Estonian Naturalists' Society in 1993. In addition to storing Jakob von Uexküll archive, it has been an organiser of a series of seminars in ecosemiotics and a co-organiser of international biosemiotics and ecosemiotics meetings (Magnus *et al.* 2006).

### **5.5. Juri Lotman Fund**

Established in 2001, it issues annually Lotman stipend since 2002. Lotman stipend is an award to one semiotics and one slavic philology student each year.

### **5.6. The Estonian Semiotics Repository**

This was established as a formal institution in order to store Juri Lotman's personal library, and handle his copyrights. Repository is also related to issuing of Lotman stipend at Tallinn University, established in 2007.

### **5.7. Semiotics library**

The specialized semiotics library at the Department of Semiotics, together with the collection at the main library of the University of Tartu, has a remarkably rich collection of the semiotic literature of the world, including the sets of quite rare publication series. This includes some donated sets of semiotic publications from Jeff Bernard, Walter Koch, Roland Posner, Thomas A. Sebeok, Eero Tarasti, and others. In addition, Jakob von Uexküll Centre in Tartu has a collection (almost complete set) of Uexküll's works, plus some archive materials.<sup>23</sup> The Estonian Semiotics Repository owns Juri Lotman's personal library. Tartu University Library stores the epistolary archive of Juri Lotman and Zara Mints. The Department of Semiotics stores the memorial semiotic library of Thomas A. Sebeok which includes his complete personal collection of semiotic literature, moved from Bloomington to Tartu in 2007 (the biosemiotic collection) and 2011 (the rest).

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<sup>23</sup> See also Magnus *et al.* 2006.

## 6. Current research

Semiotic research in Estonia is characterized by a variety of approaches and branches of semiotics covered by scholars of the same group. Its strong aspects include methodological and theoretical studies, but empirical and applied work have also been grown within the last decade.

### 6.1. Theoretical studies

Recent theoretical work in semiotics has been mostly focused on some general methodological problems, on semiotics of culture, sociosemiotics, and biosemiotics.

Studies in general semiotic theory include a further characterisation of semiotic domain via analysis of lower semiotic threshold zone, and the relationship between semiotics (sigma-sciences) and physics (phi-sciences). It concerns also the distinctions between major levels of semiosis processes, or relationships between semiotics of culture and biosemiotics, between languages and other sign systems.

Studies in cultural semiotics have been in its large part focused on explication and systematization of methodology and results of the Tartu–Moscow school. This also includes the inquiry, commenting and republication of Juri Lotman's heritage (Peet Lepik, Silvi Salupere, Marina Grishakova, Peeter Torop, Kalevi Kull). Additional topics include semiotics of literature, semiotics of naming (Ülle Pärli); semiotics of verse (Mihhail Lotman); analysis of the concept of emblem (Jelena Grigorjeva); political semiotics (Andreas Ventsel); semiotics of film (Katre Pärn), theatre (Katre Väli), performance (Ester Võsu), and media (Kaie Kotov); semiotics of translation (Peeter Torop, Elin Sütiste, Silvi Salupere), study of cultural autocommunication (Peeter Torop). Special mention should be made of the semiotics of translation, including studies of intercultural translation and translatability.

In addition to J. Lotman's models, R. Jakobson's and J. Uexküll's models are widely used in the contemporary studies of Estonian semioticians.

Remarkable development is seen in the field of sociosemiotics that has focused particularly on the semiotics of space and the semiotics of city (Anti Randviir, Tiit Remm).

Tartu is a well-established center of the contemporary biosemiotics. Departing from the works of Jakob von Uexküll and Thomas A. Sebeok and developing the field within the intellectual atmosphere of Tartu school, Tartu biosemiotics emphasizes the perspective of an animal subject, organismic and ecological levels in semiotic processes as well as mutually enriching relations between biology and cultural semiotics, especially via ecosemiotic studies. The studies in biosemiotics proper include semiotics of biological mimicry, theory and history of zoosemiotics (Timo Maran), the legacy of Jakob von Uexküll (Riin Magnus, Kalevi Kull), Thomas A. Sebeok (Kalevi Kull, Timo Maran), and the semiotic mechanisms of evolution and speciation (Kalevi Kull).

Among the Estonian scholars abroad, who have remarkably contributed to semiotics, the psychologists Jaan Valsiner, Endel Tulving, and Jaak Panksepp should be mentioned.

## 6.2. Empirical studies

From 1960s to 1980s, Russian culture served as the main material for analysis in the Tartu cultural semiotics group. Since 1990s, the situation radically changed — the major object of analysis would be Estonian culture. For instance, the objects of semiotic analysis have included Estonian poetry (Mihhail Lotman), Estonian monuments (Peeter Torop), Estonian food traditions (Silvi Salupere, Ester Võsu), Estonian films (Peeter Torop, Katre Pärn), Estonian tourist performance (Ester Võsu), Estonian poetic speech (Katre Väli), Estonian nature writing (Timo Maran), etc.

Many student projects in Tartu semiotics department include the analysis of empirical material. This includes, especially, the study of film, naming, maps, literature, theatre, etc.

Ecosemiotic studies have dealt with some examples of nature management (Morten Tønnessen), historical plant use (Renata Sõukand) and landscape design (Kati Lindström).

Zoosemiotic work included observations in Tallinn Zoo (Aleksei Turovski, Timo Maran), as well as the analysis of dog training (Riin Magnus).

### 6.3. Applied projects

Several applied projects initiated by Estonian governmental organisations have been implemented by Tartu Semiotics Department in recent years. These were related to (a) Estonian brand, (b) Estonian national customs (Estonian cuisine), (c) ideological and national conflicts. Our semioticians have been repeatedly asked to provide semiotic expertise judgment in quarrels at law, particularly concerning textual or pictorial analysis.<sup>24</sup>

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### Семiotика в Эстонии

В статье дается исторический обзор институционального развития семиотики в Эстонии в течение двух столетий и описывается кратко ее нынешний статус. Характерными чертами семиотики в Эстонии являются: (1) центральная роль двух классиков семиотики — Юрия Лотмана и Якоба фон Юксюля, (2) создание и развитие самостоятельной дисциплины — семиотики культуры — в рамках Тартуско-московской школы, (3) издание с 1964 года *Трудов по знаковым системам* в Тарту, (4) оформление биосемиотики в сотрудничестве сначала с российскими коллегами, а позже — преимущественно

с коллегами из Копенгагена, (5) наличие полновесной учебной программы по семиотике (от бакалавратуры до докторантуры), (6) институциональное разнообразие, (7) широкий спектр исследований как теоретического, так и эмпирического характера.

### **Semiootika institutsioon Eestis**

Artikkel esitab ülevaate semiootika institutsionaalsest kujunemisest Eestis alates 19. sajandist. Eesti semiootika iseloomustavateks joonteks on (1) kahe semiootika klassiku — Jakob von Uexküll ja Juri Lotmani — keskne mõju nii lähenemisviisile kui organisatsioonilisele kujunemisele; (2) kultuurisemiootika kui semiootika haru loomine ja arendamine Tartu–Moskva semiootikakoolkonna raames; (3) alates 1964. aastast ajakirja „Tõid märgisüsteemide alalt“ (*Sign Systems Studies*) väljaandmine Tartus; (4) bio-semiootika kujunemine koostöös vene, hiljem eriti taani (Kopenhaageni) kolleegidega; (5) semiootika õppekavade olemasolu kõigil ülikooli õppeastmel, sealhulgas rahvusvahelisena; (6) institutsionaalne paljususe — lisaks semiootika osakonnale Tartu Ülikoolis ka mitme muu semiootikale pühendunud organisatsiooni olemasolu; (7) nii teoreetiliste kui rakenduslike uurimisprojektide kestev arendamine.